

Historic Ships on a Lee Shore

This year has been a struggle as we try to ride out a difficult economy. Groups that depend on donations and grants have felt the sting acutely—stewards of aging historic ships even more so. Three ships in particular, the Schooners *Ernestina* and *Wawona*, and the SS *Catalina* are in such financial distress that they will be lost without outside help. Each is listed either on the National Register for Historic Places or as a National Historic Landmark. They are important—and irreplaceable—parts of our nation’s maritime heritage. Unless the funds to save them arrive soon, these three vessels, and the history they carry, will be lost.

Schooner *Ernestina*



PHOTOGRAPH BY SUSAN S. BANK



ex-Effie M. Morrissey

by Deirdre O'Regan

In Fairhaven, Massachusetts, the schooner *Ernestina* hibernates under her winter cover waiting for the spring thaw and fair winds. Unless the state has a change of heart, however, those covers may never come off. The state recently told *Ernestina's* Executive Director, Captain Gregg Swanzey, that the money the Commonwealth usually provides for the annual haul-out, repairs, maintenance, and, importantly, her US Coast Guard inspection would not be forthcoming this year.

This abandonment by the state, whose flag she flies as the official vessel of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, could be catastrophic to the vessel and is almost certain to be a disaster for the educational programs that call her home. Even on the scale of the *Ernestina's* modest finances, the amount of money is not great—but it is a crucial piece of her budget. Massachusetts actually provides only a third of the ship's annual budget. Mostly, she works for her living. Her educational programs earn nearly \$200,000 a year. Grants and donations round out her annual budget.

Is the *Ernestina* just another old vessel begging for a state handout? No. In these times of fiscal strain, is she worth the money that the state lays out, year after year, for her upkeep? She's worth it and a

lot more besides.

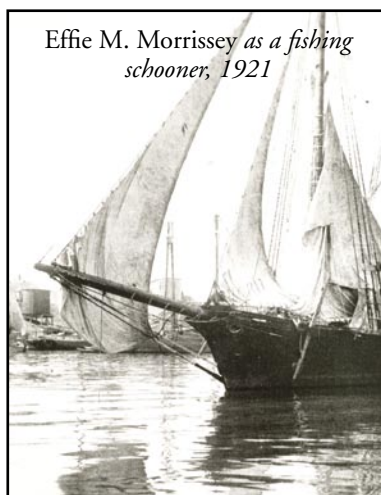
The state of Massachusetts, of course, has to make some difficult choices—times are hard. Massachusetts nears the top of the list of states with the highest borrowed money per capita. The \$15 billion dollar “Big Dig,” the reconfiguring of Boston's highway infrastructure in the form of tunnels burrowed underneath the city, has aggravated already strained state finances.

It is easy to see how state bookkeepers thought the \$200,000 they could swipe from the *Ernestina* was a plum—albeit a small one—to be plucked. So it came to pass that, nearly halfway through the state's fiscal year, the Department of Conserva-

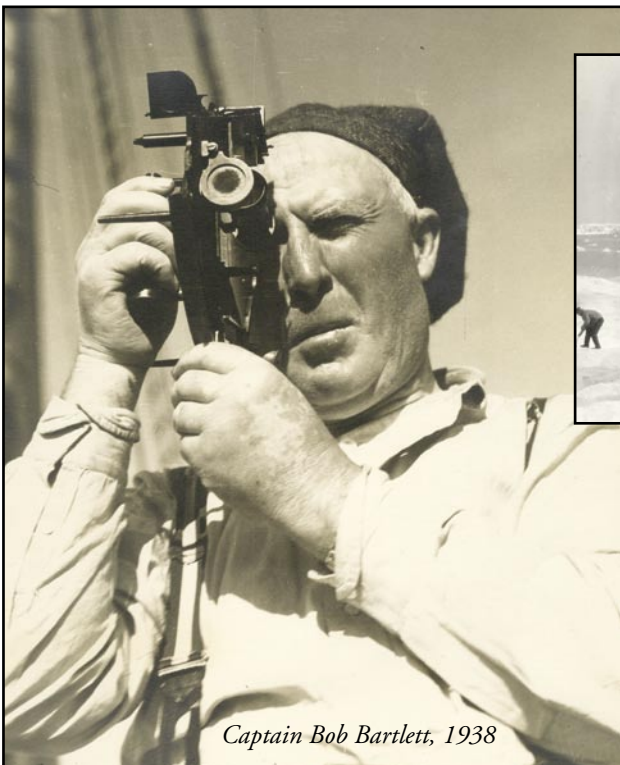
tion and Recreation gave Captain Swanzey the bad news that this year's check would not be coming. The timing was worse than the news—with almost no time to find an alternate source of funds before commitments needed to be made for the coming season, the *Ernestina's* foundation may be forced to cancel the educational programs that provide a quarter of her budget. Without these funds, the ship—at least with her current educational mission—may literally be lost.

Losing the *Ernestina* would be a tragedy. She is a vital part of the history of both Massachusetts and the nation. Permitting the state's budget offices to do what a century of gales, Arctic ice and the German Navy could not would be a sad comment on the value we place on both our history and our present.

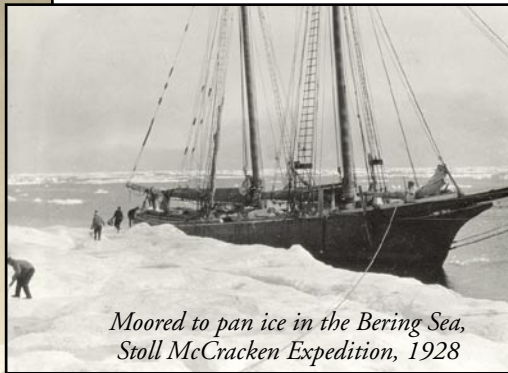
What a life she has lead! Schooner *Ernestina* began her life as the *Effie M. Morrissey*. She has been actively sailing Atlantic waters for over a century and under three flags. Her history is as varied as any single vessel could have. Built in 1894 in Essex, Massachusetts, the *Morrissey* fished on the Grand Banks—landing 250,000 pounds of cod on her maiden voyage. In 1912, the *Morrissey* was immortalized by a ballad written about her “record run” from Portland, Maine to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia.



IMAGES COURTESY SCHOONER ERNESTINA



Captain Bob Bartlett, 1938



Moored to pan ice in the Bering Sea,
Stoll McCracken Expedition, 1928

The schooner logged 200 miles in twenty hours (under just the foresail for the last eight). Even today, with a fresh breeze blowing, sailing aboard her is like riding a freight train.

By the 1920s, the *Effie M. Morrissey* made her way to the Canadian Maritimes. Luckily for the local cod, she didn't stay long. In 1924, Captain Robert Bartlett, by then a famous ship captain, navigator, and arctic explorer decided it was time for the *Effie M. Morrissey* to change careers. He sheathed her hull with greenheart and installed her first diesel engine. For twenty years, the *Morrissey* was an explorer. Sailing from New York City, she was home to expeditions of American Museum of Natural History, the Museum of the American Indian, the National Geographic Society, the Smithsonian, and others. The ship's company conducted experiments and studies in oceanography, anthropology, and brought back countless samples of Arctic plants and animals. In 1940—at nearly fifty—she set yet another record. Bartlett steered his ship to 80° 22' north latitude, under 600 miles from the North Pole. No wooden sailing vessel had ever—or would ever—come so close to the Pole.

During World War II, the *Effie M. Morrissey*, naturally enough, enlisted. She carried supplies to Arctic naval and air bases and made a number of hydrographic research missions. Like many return-

ing veterans, the *Effie M. Morrissey* had some hard times after the war. Captain Bartlett died in 1946. His ship was sold. Then she caught fire in New York and sank from the water flooding her hold from fire hoses. For most vessels, this would

have been the end of the line. For the *Effie M. Morrissey*, it was just the prelude to her fourth career.

A veteran sea captain in the Cape Verdean packet trade bought her, repaired and restored the ship. He took out the engine and set sail for the Cape Verde Islands off the west coast of Africa carrying seventy tons of cargo. He registered the schooner in Cape Verde and re-named her *Ernestina* in honor of his then-teenage daughter. For the next quarter century the *Ernestina*—under sail power alone—carried cargo and passengers amongst the islands and across the Atlantic to New England.

The stories of her transatlantic voyages include details that give us a glimpse into the realities of our nation's immigration policies and twentieth-century seafaring, making these histories real and personal. For example, the ship, sailing with no auxiliary power, endured countless gales and hurricanes. She was dismasted at least twice—once a crewmember rowed a small boat ten miles to shore to get help. Some passages were torturously slow at 54 days across the Atlantic; others took half that long.

For Cape Verdean communities in southern New England, *Ernestina* provided, for many, their only links to family and homeland an ocean away. People regularly flocked by the hundreds to greet the ship when it arrived in port after a transAtlantic. In the 1950s, crew members still built

new sails by hand on the dock in Providence, using the traditional skills of needle and sail palm.

By the 1960s, *Ernestina* was tired. Although she was still sailing a hundred trips a year between the islands, she made only one round-

trip voyage to New England. She began hogging and her decks were totally worn down. Captain Mendes could no longer afford her maintenance costs. So valuable was her service, however, that the Cape Verdean government stepped in and paid for \$25,000 of repairs in 1963. Her frames, keel sections, and hull timbers were rebuilt in 1972 and she sailed commercially for two more years.

In 1976, under the auspices of the National Maritime Historical Society, the Friends of the *Ernestina/Morrissey* was formed to raise funds for acquiring and restoring the ship and planning for her future. A year later the Government of Cape Verde officially gave the ship back to the US as an expression of good will to honor the ties between the two countries and *Ernestina's* role in it. Cape Verdeans worked locally to restore the vessel to a seaworthy condition to make the passage back to the



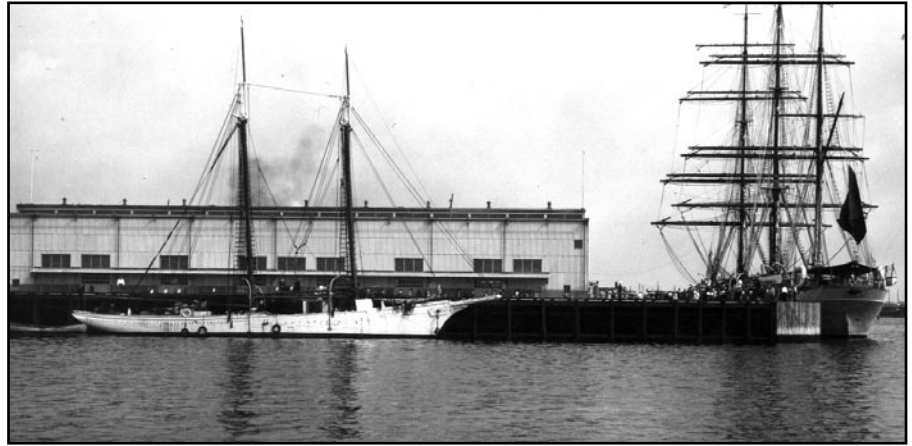
States with materials and services furnished by local agencies. In 1978 the Massachusetts Schooner *Ernestina* Commission was established to receive the official title; the City of New Bedford pledged \$40,000 for improvements to their waterfront in order to provide the ship with a suitable homeport. *Ernestina* left Mindelo, Cape Verde for good in the summer of 1982.

Over the next several years, the ship was transformed thanks to the support and drive of Massachusetts legislators and its new Captain and Executive Director, Dan Moreland. Captain Moreland supervised a near total restoration. In 1987 the National Trust for Historic Preservation honored Moreland and the ship for “their outstanding commitment to excellence in historic preservation.” With Moreland at the helm, the ship attained USCG certification as a sailing school vessel. *Ernestina* visited ports up and down the eastern seaboard and northeast into Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, returning to her former homeports while educating a new generation of seafarers.

In 1990, the Schooner *Ernestina* became a National Historic Landmark. Ten years ago, the Massachusetts legislature established the Schooner *Ernestina* Commission, designating the ship as the “official vessel of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.” When the New Bedford Whaling National Historic Park was established in 1996, *Ernestina* was named as part of the park.

Since then, Schooner *Ernestina* has been sailing regularly from spring to autumn conducting educational programs from short dockside events to two-week-long sailing programs. In the last several years, the ship has hosted approximately 5,000 students and 15,000 persons a year. Her office crew conducts outreach programs with school children and educational organizations year-round. At the moment, those programs and the future of the *Ernestina* herself are in grave danger.

Without funds, there will be no ship’s maintenance and repairs, no USCG inspection. *Ernestina* will lose her certifica-



Ernestina as a Cape Verde packet ship in 1948—docked at the state pier in New Bedford, Massachusetts, now her homeport.

tions and she will not be allowed to get underway with students or passengers. The professional sailing crew and educators, some of whom have a long relationship with the ship, will move on to other organizations resulting in a loss of consistency. \$200,000 in programming fees will not be earned and organizations will find other ships on which to run their programs, jeopardizing long-standing relationships and returning programs. Foundation grants will be curtailed and perhaps completely cut off if the ship is not sailing. Support from members and donors plus

so many aspects of their heritage.

Schooner *Ernestina* is unique among historic ships in that she is already fully restored, USCG-certified to get underway on voyages with students and passengers. She does not require a restoration costing millions of dollars—but will if left to rot at the dock. In the decision to cut her funding, perhaps Massachusetts legislators were not fully aware of her rich history, her on-going programs that serve the public faithfully, and a wooden ship’s inability to maintain itself. Economic times are hard, but what will be left once we recover? †



Delivering a gift from the Republic of Cape Verde

For information, contact Schooner Ernestina, 89 North Water St, PO Box 2010, New Bedford MA 02741; Ph. 508 992-4900; or visit their award-winning web site at www.ernestina.org.

*With a “Bone in her Teeth,”
1998 Gloucester Schooner Festival*

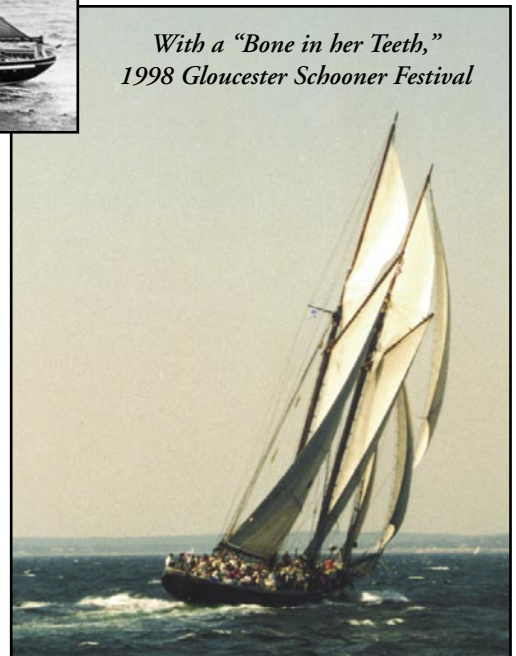


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